



Re-Visiting the Question: Are Rājopādhyāyas Newārs of Nepal?

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The Rājopādhyāyas are considered one of the castes among the Newārs of Nepal. They have an integral role in the culture of the Newārs of the Kathmandu Valley. Anthropologists have historically categorized Newārs into two groups: Hindu Newārs and Buddhist Newārs.¹ The Rājopādhyāyas, also known as Deo-Brahmans, serve as priests mostly to the Valley's Hindu Newārs, leading them to be listed as part of this group. Life in Kathmandu Valley was structured around the caste system, and as the priests of the Newārs, Rājopādhyāyas have assimilated with and lived alongside the Newārs since ancient time. Although most Newārs in present day Nepal consider Rājopādhyāyas to be one of them,² a perusal of the

online "Rājopādhyāya Blogs" makes clear that a new generation of Rājopādhyāyas are expressing a distinct and separate non-Newār identity. *The exploration and analysis of this identity is the focus of this article, and begs the question: "Are Rājopādhyāyas Newārs or not?"*

Background

Several of Lichchhavi inscriptions had mentioned Brāhmans (as the highest caste), thus we know Brāhmans did exist in ancient Nepal.³ There are many legendary stories about the origin of Rājopādhyāya Brāhmans in Nepal Valley (known as Kathmandu Valley these days), most popular being that of two brothers Alas Raj and Ulas Raj coming from Kanyakunj, India with the then rulers Harisimha Dev or Nānya Dev. Rājopādhyāyas are believed to be the descendents of Alas Raj and Parvate Brāhmans⁴ to be those of Ulas Raj who went to settle in the hills outside of Nepal Valley. According to Sharma (2013), there is no exact date so far about when Rājopādhyāya Brāhmans migrated to the Valley. Some say they came into the Valley in different years from Vidhyanchal Parvat and from Gujarat, India. But Sharma (1989) believes that Jayasthiti Malla (1382-1395) brought Rājopādhyāyas (along with the Maithili Brahmins) from outside the country to help with the social code he was planning to introduce in the nation. The oldest inscription where "Rājopādhyāya" was written, dated 1360, is at Pashupati (the famous Hindu temple in Kathmandu), which was at the time of renovation of Shiva-Linga after the then King of Bengal, Sultān Shams Ud-din Ilias

1 Newārs are the indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley that was known as the Nepal Valley until recently. The two groups are: Hindu Newārs consisting of Deo-Brāhman (Rājopādhyāya), *Sesyas*, Kāranjit, and Jogi, and Buddhist Newārs consisting of *Gubhāju*, *Bare*, *Urāy*, *Jyapu*, *Sayemi*, *Pun*, *Chhipā*, *Nau*, *Kau*, *Duin*, *Po*, *Nāye*, *Kulu*, *Chyāmkhala*, and so on. *Sesya* is a collective name for Shrestha, Prādhān, Prādhānāng, Malla, Rājbandāry, Amātya, Joshi, Thānju, Māskey, etc. *Urāye* is a collective name for Tulādhār, Tāmākār, Kansākār, Sthāpit, Bania, Selālik, Shilākār, Shikhrākār, and Sindhurākār. *Jyāpu* is a collective name for Dongol, Maharjan, Suwāl, Tepe, Bāsukalā, etc. For details, see Fürer-Haimendorf (1956), Rosser (1966), Greenwold (1974), Quigley (1986), Gellner (1986), and Shākya (2000).

2 Some anthropologists have even included Jhā Brāhmans and Bhatta Brāhmans as Newārs. There are conflicting reports and claims made by various authors on this topic. On October 28, 1983 the weekly Newār Newspaper wrote "Maithils (Jhā) began to speak Newāri and became Newārs" (quoted by Gellner, 1986) while on the other hand Acharya (1979) wrote that Maithil Brāhmans and Banjās (Thokde), migrants from Vihār spoke Newāri but ashamed to call themselves Newārs. However, when I talked to Jhā Brāhmans, their response was straight, "we are not Newārs as some people refer us to be. We

belong to Terai Brāhmans. We speak fluent Newār language because we have been living in Newār localities and assimilating with them in certain cultures." It is noteworthy that many Jhā Brāhmans living in Kathmandu Valley also contribute in Newār literature and teach Nepal Bhāshā in schools and colleges.

3 Regmi, 1969: 272

4 *Parvate* Brāhmans are the Brāhmans from the Hills of Nepal.

destroyed the original Shiva-Linga.⁵ It is noteworthy that before the use of Rājopādhyāya name, they were called just Brāhman; even after Rājopādhyāya was in use, many still wrote Upādhyāya and Som Sharamana and Suvedi (“Su-Vedi” someone who is perfect in Veda).⁶

Until 1980s, most Rājopādhyāyas (70-80 %) were engaged as priests.⁷ Among Rājopādhyāyas, the two *Makhan-chhen* (those who live at Makhan locality) and *Wonga-chhen* (those who live at Wonga, also known as Indra-Chowk) groups were the gurus and *purohits* of the then Malla Kings.⁸ Thus they were given the name Rājopādhyāya, meaning “the *Upādhyāyas* of the Rajas (the Kings) or the “priests/teachers of the Kings.” Some believe that the name Rājopādhyāya was given to the Deo-Brāhmins by the then King Pratap Singh Shah (1775-1778), the eldest son of the first Shah King Prithvi Nārāyan Shah.⁹ Newārs in general, address Rājopādhyāya colloquially as *Dya-Bājyā* or *Dya-Bhāju*, *Newā Barmu*, and *Dya Barmu* (translates as Deo-Brāhman). Some scholars prefer to call them “Newār Brāhmins” that is a direct or literal translation of the *Newā* term “*Newā Barmu*.”¹⁰ In fact, Rājopādhyāya was a title just like “Vajrāchārya” (Āchāryas or Masters of Vajrayāna Buddhism) among the Buddhist Newārs.¹¹ When Rājopādhyāya Brāhmins acculturated with the Newārs of the Valley, they were considered one “*Thar*” just like any other “*Thar* or caste” among the Newārs¹² similar to what Vajrāchāryas are considered now-a-days, merely one of the castes of the Newārs rather than the “respectable title” they earned as the Āchāryas of Vajrayāna.

Rājopādhyāyas do not consider themselves Hindu – they follow Sanātana Dharma.¹³ The Sanātana Dharma is defined as follows: “Though worshiped in different

ways, and by different names, in a variety of ways, there is ultimately only one God. God is not Hindu, Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. Rather, God is the ultimate inspiration of all sects and religions. There is nowhere and nothing in which God is not present. For Sanātana Dharma, practical importance is also placed on studying the ancient Vedic scriptures (such as the famous *Bhāgavad Gitā*, *Upanishads*, *Yoga Sutras* and *Narada Bhakti Sutras*), temple worship (*pujā*), sacred rituals and personal acts of meaningful spiritual purification. Yoga and meditation practice are also essential aspects of Sanātana Dharma. The true goal of both is to achieve self-realization and God-consciousness. Perhaps one of the most beautiful aspects of this ancient spiritual path is its tolerance of other people's cultures, religions, and views.”¹⁴ Prakashdhar Sharma, the temple priest of Krishna Mandir in Lalitpur, Baldev Juju, the President of Vedic Pratisthan, and the Sanskrit expert Ramapati Raj Sharma of Bhaktapur strongly opposed to what people have perceived of them, “the Hindus”.¹⁵ Ramapati Raj does not believe they have entered Nepal Valley from India. He expressed strongly that there are sufficient evidences that human civilization had started from Himalayas rather than from India; perhaps Brāhmins from the Himalayas migrated to the lower-lands and then to nearby India and then back to their own land Nepal Valley.

Rājopādhyāyas are a small population, little more than one thousand, yet an important group serving as the priests of *Sesyas*, one powerful caste among the Newārs.¹⁶ *Sesyas* invite only Rājopādhyāyas, the followers and practitioners of Vedic and Tantric rituals, as their priests not Hill Brāhmins or Terai Brāhmins. Due to their invisibility in the population (and perhaps, because of their assimilation into Newār culture), most non-Newārs do not realize that there are Newār Brāhmins among the Newārs.¹⁷

Their dwellings are mainly the three cities in the Kathmandu Valley: Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur (see Table 1). In 1997, there were three Rājopādhyāya

5 Sharmā, 2013.

6 The Su-Vedi part informed by Ras Joshi, through personal communication in July 2015).

7 Toffin 1998

8 Juju, N.S. 1126.

9 Toffin 1998, Toffin 2007

10 Scholars such as Fürer-Haimendorf, 1956; Rosser, 1966; Gellner, 1986; Levy, 1990, among others.

11 Thanks to Bāsav Rājopādhyāya (USA) for clarifying my confusion on this matter.

12 Shrestha, 2010.

13 Shrestha, 2010.

14 <http://www.dharmacentral.com/dharmainfo/introductiontodharma.php>

15 Shrestha, 2010.

16 Powerful in the sense that most *Sesyas* are educated and hold powerful positions in the government, in trade and other “white colour” jobs.

17 Gellner, 1986

households with 17 members in the town of Sankhu in the northeast of Kathmandu City as well, who were providing priestly rituals to the *Sesya* communities there.¹⁸ Although most Rājopādhyāyas live in localities near the old palaces of Malla Kings, Shākya (2000) found 11 households in the lower section (known as *Kwahne*) in the southern part of Kathmandu. They were migrants from Bhaktapur, migrated some 200 years ago. Migrating to various localities and towns in and around the Kathmandu Valley (Bode, Banepa, Chapagaun, Dhulikhel, Ichangu, Kirtipur, Nala, Panauti, Pharping, Sankhu, Satungal, Thankot, Tokha, and so on) for the purpose of serving the local temples appears to be a norm for them.¹⁹ However, according to Sharma (2013), most

Identity Issue

There is no doubt that the Rājopādhyāyas have been assimilating into the Newār society over many generations, adopting the Newār language and customs.²⁰ Some Rājopādhyāyas do not seem to oppose being included as one of the Newār castes. However, some argue that though they have assimilated with Newār culture and community and speak Nepal Bhāshā (official name for Newār language; Newārs call it *Newā Bhāy*) they have not become Newār themselves. Thus it appears like there are two distinct groups of Rājopādhyāyas: one group calling themselves as Newārs and the other group denying it. On the Newārs' side, most of them

Table 1: Division of Rājopādhyāyas by Cities, Locations, Clans, and Surnames, Nepal

City	Families belonging to particular locations	Clan (Gotra)	Surname
Kathmandu	1) Wonga-Chhen 2) Makhan-Chhen	Kaushik; Bhārdwāj	"Rājopādhyāya", Rimāl, Suvedi
Lalitpur	1) Swanimh 2) Mandi-Chhen 3) Tadhanlivi 4) Walā 5) Baknimh 6) Nuga khala	Gargye (Garga); Bhārdwāj	"Rājopādhyāya", Āchārya, Suvedi
Bhaktapur	1) Ipā-Chhen 2) Chuchā-Chhen	Bhārdwāj	"Rājopādhyāya", Suvedi

Source: Gobardhan Sharma (2013) and Bāsav Rājopādhyāya (personal communication, 2015).

Note:

- 1) Individuals belonging to any of these three *Gotras* could write "Sharma" or "Sharma Rājopādhyāya" as their surname except for women because Sharma means "someone who is an expert in (religious) story-telling" which does not apply to women, "story-telling in public" being the job of males only among the Sanātanis and Hindus. However, these days Rājopādhyāya women have started to write Sharma as well (Bāsav Rājopādhyāya, July 2015).
- 2) According to Toffin (2007), Baknimh of Lalitpur is divided into three lineage groups, namely, Patuko (22 households), Gābahā (2 households), and Balimh (8 households).
- 3) The sixth group "Nuga khala" of Lalitpur is extinct now-a-days (Allen, 1996; Dyczkowski, 2000).

Rājopādhyāyas complete the regular rituals for their clients in these areas and then return home to Bhaktapur or other original localities. Besides being the temple priests (*pujāri*) in Nārāyana temples such as Changu Nārāyana, Ichangu Nārāyana, Bishankhu Nārāyana, and Shesh Nārāyana, they are also the *pujāris* for famous temples such as Patan Krishna Mandir, Bhaktapur Taleju, Lalitpur Taleju, and Kathmandu Taleju. They are also the only Agnihotris (those who prepare the sacred fire place) in the famous Aginmatha, Lalitpur.

18 Shrestha, 2012

19 Toffin, 2007

(both Buddhists and Hindus) consider Rājopādhyāyas as Newārs, without any hesitation. In addition, because the social organization of the Rājopādhyāyas is very similar to those of the Newārs, other ethnic groups in Nepal

20 Acculturation is not a new phenomenon, which is defined as "acculturation comprehends those phenomena which results when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits, 1936: 149).

may also refer them as Newārs.²¹ The acceptance of Rājopādhyāyas as Newārs in general may have been the reason why Joshi and Rose (1966) did not mention about the Rājopādhyāya Brāhmans as a separate Brāhman group in their seminal book which defined three groups of Indo-Aryans living in Nepal.²² It is worthwhile to mention that people do acknowledge the Indo-Aryan facial features of Rājopādhyāyas. Due to the fact that this group has kept their endogamous marriage intact, their facial features have not changed much unlike the cases of other groups who entered the Valley and merged with the Newārs by inter-marrying and living with them. Indo-Aryans, Mongoloids, and various mixed stocks are the unique characteristics of ethnically heterogeneous Newārs.²³

Regarding amalgamation, non-Newārs becoming Newārs is not a new phenomenon in the Nepal Valley.²⁴ Acculturation has been taking place in Nepal Valley among people from various ethnic groups into Newār culture and society. Newārs are related to one another by a common culture and language regardless of whether they originally belonged to the Vrij, the Shākya, the Koli, the Malla or the ruling groups such as the Lichchhavi, the Ahir Gupta, or the Thakuri Varman.²⁵ In addition

to these groups in the ancient Valley of Nepal, there were also prehistoric Khas and Kirāta living together for thousands of years who became Newārs.²⁶ Shrestha (2014) goes even further to explain that the Newār society and Nepal's history is quite unique in that each of the ruling families assimilated into the Newār society after losing their power. That was what happened to the Kirātas, the Lichchhavis, and the Mallas – they all merged into the Newār society of Nepal Valley. I have some relatives in Om Bāhā and Lagan Bāhā in Kathmandu who were Upādhyāya Brāhmans in the past (some generations ago) but became Vajrāchārya Newārs by performing Chudākarma initiation. I have heard the older people among them tell their history of ancestry to their wives but never heard them say “we are not Newārs.” They are 100 percent Newārs and many of them have been serving as priests to their Buddhist Newār *jajamāns* (clients). Besides Rājopādhyāya group, Daivajna/Joshi and Āchāju are the other groups that had Brahman ancestors and are serving the Hindu Newār communities in various capacities,²⁷ both groups had totally assimilated with the Newār culture and society to become Newārs.

While reading the online blogs of Rājopādhyāyas, it becomes clear that not all of them appreciate being treated as or being called Newārs. From his data collected between 1978-1988 Toffin (1995) sensed the willingness of many Rājopādhyāyas to merge into the wider Nepali culture, perhaps into *Parbate* Brāhmans as apparent from some of them taking their clan names Suvedi, Rimāl, and so on as their last names, which also match with the *Parbate* Brāhman names. Writing these names does not mean that they have abandoned being the *purohits* of *Sesya* Newārs.²⁸ For example, the Makhan Rājopādhyāyas who write Suvedi are still serving their *Sesya* Newār clients by performing lifecycle rituals.²⁹

21 Toffin, 2007. When I spoke with Hill Brāhmans (*Parvate* or *Parvatiya* Brāhmans) about the issue, they hesitated to call Rājopādhyāyas as Brāhmans. Some of them said “they are different – we have nothing to do with them; we do not give our daughters to them nor our sons marry their daughters – they are the *purohits* of the Newārs and we are not.”

22 The three Indo-Aryan groups mentioned were: one residing in Terai, second group the Pahādi in the lower hills of far-western Nepal, and the third were the high-caste Hindu families who migrated from India during the Muslim invasion.

23 Shrestha, 2014.

24 Shrestha, 2014. But then there are other complex issues of the Newārs. Gellner (1986) noted that in the periphery of Kathmandu Valley and in historical records, only *Sesyas* are considered Newārs. That reminds me of my *Sesya* friends in Kathmandu, who used to say “we Newārs” among themselves, which made me think “am I not a Newār then?” Moreover, I had a few *Sesya* friends whose surname was “Newā,” similar to what Gellner (1986) had noticed.

25 Malla, 1981, Shrestha, 2014.

26 Bista, 1989.

27 Vaidya, Mānandhar, and Joshi, 1993.

28 Although in theory Rājopādhyāyas are supposed to serve only up to *Sesya* Newārs as designated by Jung Bahadur's 1854 National Law and as claimed by the Rājopādhyāyas themselves, Rosser (1966) had found clients from *Jyapu* and other castes using Rājopādhyāyas as their priests, so did Vajracharya (1989) and Shakya (2000). I know a few *Jyapu* and other caste families who have Rājopādhyāya priest.

29 Bāsav Rājopādhyāya through personal communication, July 2015.

On the other hand I have seen some Rājopādhyāyas write “Sharma Rājopādhyāya,” “Rimāl Rājopādhyāya,” or “Suvedi Rājopādhyāya” as their surnames just to distinguish themselves from the *Parvate* Brāhmins.³⁰

In the context of what the previous (foreign as well as Nepalese) researchers had to say about Rājopādhyāyas being Newārs or non-Newārs, it should be noted that either statement depended on who their informants were. For example, in Furer-Haimendorf’s (1956: 22) words “Deo Brāhmins consider themselves as Newārs and speak Newāri among themselves” while in Toffin’s (2007: 57, 58) words “....the Rājopādhyāya do not consider themselves to be altogether like the Newār. They prefer to place themselves outside this ethnic group.Rājopādhyāya Brāhmins today feel themselves closer to *Parvatiyā* Brāhmins than to Newārs.”³¹

In addition, some Deo-Brāhmins do not like to call themselves “Rājopādhyāya” because that name is synonymous with the Upādhyāya *purohit* of the Rajas (Kings) in the past, thus is not appropriate to all Deo-Brāhmins. The Rājopādhyāyas of Lalitpur who stopped working for the Rajas started serving the general public (*Sesya* Newārs) and began writing various surnames such as Sharma, Rimāl, Suvedi, and so on. One should also remember the fact that in 1854 when the then Prime-Minister Jung Bāhādur declared the *Muluki Ain* (the Law of the Nation), Rājopādhyāyas were not included

among the Brāhmins in general nor were they included among the Newārs rather they were segregated as one of the hill ethnic groups or *Janjāti*.³²

Most Rājopādhyāyas also like to differentiate themselves from the *Parvate* Brāhmins on the ground that they do only “proper” Brāhminical activities whereas *Parvate* Brāhmins are engaged in farming that is viewed as low in status by the Newārs.³³ They do claim to be Brāhmins superior to or equal to *Parvate* Brāhmins, who they like to call “village Brāhmins”.³⁴ As explained by my informants the fact that Rājopādhyāyas are experts in two Vedas (the Sāma Veda, the Book of Songs/Sāmāna and the Yajur Veda, the Book of Rituals) unlike *Parvate* Brāhmins whose expertise is only Yajur Veda also make them superior to *Parvate* Brāhmins. On the other hand, Toffin (2007) reported that many *Parvate* Brāhmins consider Rājopādhyāya inferior to them and do not marry with Rājopādhyāya even today despite Rājopādhyāyas’ claim to be higher in status than Hill Brāhmins.

Similarity in Practices and Rituals of the Rājopādhyāyas and other Newārs

The considerable role that Rājopādhyāyas have played and continue to play in Newār societies must not be ignored.³⁵ In addition to living alongside the Newārs for generations, they have also contributed significantly in the literature and research activities of the Newārs. One of the most significant works of the Rājopādhyāyas is that they have established an organization called Vedic Academy to study and do research on Newār rituals and Vedic methods.³⁶

They have been celebrating the Newār festivals and performing almost all the rites of passage rituals, including the old-age ceremony *Jyā-Jithi-Junko* of the Newārs. Each clan of Rājopādhyāyas has their own *āgam* with their Tantric secret clan deity “*āgam-dya*” just like other high caste Hindu and Buddhist Newārs do.³⁷

Rājopādhyāyas also have their lineage deity called *digu-dya* like those of the Newārs. The “worship of this

30 Sometimes, Rājopādhyāyas were compelled to change their surnames, especially during the Rānā Regime. There were events when those who wrote Rājopādhyāya were not given admission to the Sanskrit Pāthshālā, the Vedic school in Kathmandu. They were denied admission by saying “Newārs are not allowed to learn the Veda.” For this reason, a teacher and priest Achutānand Rājopādhyāya (father of Bāsav Rājopādhyāya) and a researcher and priest Baldev Juju had to change their surnames to “Rimāl” and “Juju” respectively to get admitted to the Vedic School. Furthermore, there were people who changed their surname to “Rimāl” to get a job in the Royal Palace while their sons and daughters continued to write Rājopādhyāya. Such changes were needed only during the Shāh Regime when the palace ceased appointing the Rājopādhyāyas as the Royal *Purohita*. (I am grateful to Bāsav Rājopādhyāya for this valuable information).

31 Due to such feelings, only a few of Rājopādhyāyas were concerned about the cultural and ethnic movements of the Newārs (Toffin, 2007).

32 Toffin, 1998.

33 Levy, 1990.

34 Toffin, 2007.

35 “Societies” is written here as there are many societies with various cultures and occupational tasks among the Newārs.

36 Juju, 2002/2003.

37 Toffin, 1984; Toffin, 1995; Toffin, 2007.

deity” called *Depuja* is celebrated differently by various locality groups of Rājopādhyāyas, with designated *digu-dya* in various temples of each group.³⁸ For example, *Wonga-Chhen* lineage worship Mahalaxmi at Ichangu, *Makhan-Chhen* group worship Dhumvārāhi at Vishālānagar, the Lalitpur groups worship Purnachandi situated at Gābāhā, and the *digu-dya* of Rājopādhyāyas in Bhaktapur is the *Dya-Māju* or Taleju. Similarly, other Newārs have various ways of worshipping different deities as *digu-dya* in temples and shrines throughout the Kathmandu Valley.³⁹ For example, some Newārs have *Lun-madhi ajima* at Bhadrakālī as their *digu-dya*, some have *Mahā-dya* and *Nārāyan-dya* as their *digu-dya*.⁴⁰ According to Vajrāchārya (2011), the Buddhist Sangha members of Lalitpur *Kwa-Bāhā* worship the Ratna Stupa of their *Bāhā* as their *digu-dya*; Rudra Mahavihar members of Lalitpur and Vikramashil Mahavihar members in Kathmandu also celebrate *depuja* or *digu-pujā* by considering their *Bāhā* stupa as *digu-dya*; and the Shākyas of Basantapur worship Ratnasambhava (one of the five Pancha Buddhas) at Swoyambhu Stupa as their *digu-dya*.

Being the main *pujāri* of Patan Taleju (Lalitpur Taleju) temple, Rājopādhyāyas of Lalitpur have important duties including making decisions on choosing a Patan Kumāri before the two last stages of the selection process, working alongside other Newār priests and experts.⁴¹ Other duties include worshipping the Sonimha Kumāri of *Jyapu* caste at Sonimha locality in Lalitpur. The “power of the senior (*thakālī*)” is something that the Rājopādhyāyas have respected, appreciated, and obeyed⁴² as have all other Newārs within each major caste.⁴³

One of the other important identifications of the Newārs is their traditional *guthis*.⁴⁴ Newārs have many

such *guthis* related to their lineage deity, funeral, various festivals, caste or Sangha membership, and so on. Similarly, Rājopādhyāyas also have a number of *guthis* within their localities and lineages such as “Kāntipur Upākarma Guthi” in Kathmandu,⁴⁵ *sanaan guthi* (Funeral Guthi), *Indrāni Guthi* in Bhaktapur and also *dhaubaji guthi*, *hayenchā guthi*, *khir guthi* – the last three are extinct these days.⁴⁶ Besides Mother’s Day (*Ma ya khwā soyegu*) and Father’s Day (*Bau ya khwā soyegu*) traditions, the annual *Mha-Puja*, a significant cultural practice of the Newārs during the *Swonti* (Tihār) festival when each person worships his or her inner self and the eldest woman of the household blesses each person, is also an important part of Rājopādhyāya tradition. Just like the Newārs, *teej*, a big annual festival and fasting observed by the *Parvate* Chhetri and Brāhman women for their husbands’ wellbeing, is not celebrated by Rājopādhyāya women.

Daughters are very important in Rājopādhyāya families, mainly because the priestly functions of a family are performed by the son-in-law (*jilājan*) of the family or his son (*bhinā-machā*).⁴⁷ Daughters are an integral part of the family for other Newārs as well because of their roles during a child’s “*janko*” (solid food introduction) ceremony and during the seventh-day homage to the dead parents or dead brothers and other important rituals such as *Vratavandh* or *Chudakarma* initiation of boys, where the daughters of the house including *ninis* (father’s sisters) play essential roles. Moreover, females belonging to Rājopādhyāya group do not pierce their noses similar to other Newār women, indicating both groups as ancient residents of Nepal Valley unlike the newcomers of hill dwellers who pierce their noses.⁴⁸ Regardless of what surnames some Rājopādhyāyas/Deo-Brāhmins write and how near they feel with *Parvate* Brāhmins, “not piercing girls’ noses” shows their strong “Newārness.”

Similar to the Buddhist Newār priests the

“conference.”

38 Toffin, 2007.

39 Differences in practice of *digu-dya* worship will be discussed in the next section.

40 Vajrāchārya, 2011.

41 Allen, 1996. Kumāri is the Living Goddess of the Newārs; for the details of Kumāri, see Allen (1996).

42 Toffin, 2007.

43 This was true mostly in the past – which has been weakening as modernization is taking over the old traditions (Toffin, 2007).

44 A *guthi* is a socio-religious organization of the Newārs – the word is believed to have come from the Sanskrit “*Gosthi*” which translates as a “meeting” or a

45 Shākya, 2000.

46 Sharmā, 2013.

47 Information collected from Bāsav Rajopadhyaya.

48 Bāsav Rājopādhyāya told me the meaning of non-piercing of noses by the Newārs, including Rājopādhyāya Newārs. Newārs believe that young virgin girls or “Kumāris” should not be allowed to bleed in any form, especially in the facial area, so they do not pierce the girls’ noses.

Vajrāchāryas, it is compulsory for the Rājopādhyāyas to learn Sanskrit; for the first group to master the Vajrayāna literature and rites of passage *vidhi* (all written in Sanskrit) and for the latter group to master Vedic rituals. Both of these groups are *Tantric* practitioners. Both groups (including females) are given *Dikshā* (*Dekhā* in Newār language) compulsorily, at least in the past. The classical dance Charyā Nritya (*chachā pyākhan*) is an important part of both cultures, with specific rituals of their own traditions. Rājopādhyāyas and Vajrāchāryas perform secretive Charyā dances in their respective āgam as well. Also, Rājopādhyāyas and other Newārs regard the birth and death pollutions as highly important events and the rules are strictly followed and purifications are taken very seriously.

Another important tradition is that for nine generations the Rājopādhyāyas of Lalitpur have been performing as the Narsingha in the Hiranyakasipu-Narsingha dance in front of Krishna Mandir during the *Kārti Pyākhan* (“Kārtik Nāch” in Nepali) in the month of Kārtik along with other Newārs.⁴⁹ As suggested by the King’s guru Harivansa Upādhyāya (a Rājopādhyāya) to bring together all castes among the Newārs so as to strengthen relationship among all Newār castes as well as between the King and the public, King Siddhinarsingh Malla of Lalitpur started the annual dance *Kārti Pyākhan* in year 757 N.S. (about 378 years ago). Till today, the dance-drama is being performed annually by Rājopādhyāya, Vajrāchārya, Shākya, Shrestha, Maharjan, Chitrakār, Malla, Pode, Kushle, and so on.⁵⁰ These are just a few examples of not only the strong acculturation of Rājopādhyāyas with the Newārs but also of their becoming one with the Newārs.

What the Rājopādhyāyas do Differently than other Newārs

Rājopādhyāyas are one homogenous group with just a few insignificant differences among their different lineages whereas Newārs have multi-castes with various cultural and religious backgrounds from priestly to so-called untouchable castes. Rājopādhyāyas strictly prohibit widow remarriage and divorce is extremely rare⁵¹ whereas Newārs have relaxed attitude towards

both, especially among the Buddhist Newārs and among the *Jyāpus* in particular.

Rājopādhyāyas worship their lineage deity *digu-dya* only at the time of a male child’s initiation (*Vratavandha*) time or during a wedding and they worship the statues of the deity inside a temple and not the whole clan members come together to celebrate and to have feast as the Newārs do.⁵² Most often, except for the few groups mentioned in the previous section, among the Newārs *digu-dya* is a stone without any particular shape and worshipped annually or multiple times a year in a designated open area where the *digu-dya* is located, by all the lineage members. There might be a *digu-puja-guthi* or *digu-guthi* association related to each lineage group of the Newārs.⁵³

Although Rājopādhyāyas practice Newār culture, they may make minor modifications in a couple of rituals or sometimes add a few extra ceremonies as required by their Tantric practice. For example, when a child is born in a Rājopādhyāya family, they send 12 half-cut *gwe* (areca nuts or betel nuts) turned upside down if the child is a son and turned the cut-side up if the child is a girl along with a package of orange coloured vermilion powder and a package of cloves, as to notify the newly mother’s natal family of the birth of the child and it’s gender. They call this ritual “*gwe-sinha-po chhwaye*.” Most other Newārs call this ritual “*sichu-palu kyene chhoye*” and include a ball of molasses (if it is a boy) or half of it (if it is a girl) along with herbal items to be used for the soup of the newly mother. Rājopādhyāyas may add a ritual to their marriage custom, which is the *Diksha* ceremony for the bride and the groom.⁵⁴ *Ihi*, the initiation of girls, is an important custom for most caste groups among the Newārs. Depending on who their informants are, Vajrāchārya (1986) reported that Rājopādhyāyas do not perform *ihi*, and Allen (1996) reported since the 1960s, Rājopādhyāyas have started to conduct *ihi* ritual to their daughters. The latter report may be a new development in the customs of Rājopādhyāyas because in the past their daughters were given away in marriage when they were still young children but

widow remarriage and out of inter-caste marriages among the Rājopādhyāyas are called *Lāke Bāyā* or *Lāke Barmu* and they lose the status of priests.

49 This dance tells the story through gestures by dancing in the traditional Newār musical instrumental tunes.

50 Shrestha, 2010.

51 Toffin, 2007; Sharma, 2013; and personal communication with Bāsav Rājopādhyāya. The children born out of

52 Toffin, 2007.

53 Vajrāchārya, 2011.

54 Vajrāchārya, 1986.

after the new national law in the 1960s abolished child marriage, most Rājopādhyāyas may have started *ihī* for their daughters.⁵⁵

Furthermore, Rājopādhyāya boys have to go through a ritual called “*burān-taye*” according to some informants, and “*bāhrā-taye*” according to Sharma (2013). This ritual which used to last for months is meant for the boys to make them seriously learn their priestly rituals, which is curtailed and completed within a day these days. This ritual is not practiced by other Newārs.

Unlike the Newārs, the practising Rājopādhyāyas do not eat garlic, mushroom and meat other than duck

population of Rājopādhyāyas in the past (see Table 2). My sources have informed me that the Rājopādhyāyas have been collecting their population data that have not been complete yet.

Based on the data of 1978-1988 by Toffin and of 2013 by Sharma, the population of Rājopādhyāya has drastically decreased within the past 25-35 years, from 1500 to 1000. Losing one third of the population within such a short period is highly unusual and could only result if one or more of the following events occurred: (1) a large number of Rājopādhyāya girls had inter-caste marriages and/or (2) a large number of Rājopādhyāyas migrated to remote parts of Nepal or left the country

Table 2: Rājopādhyāya Population in Nepal in Various Years Estimated by Different Individuals

Year	Population of Rājopādhyāya				Estimated/Reported by
	Kathmandu	Lalitpur	Bhaktapur	Total	
1978-1988	-	-	-	1,500	Gérard Toffin
1996	-	-	-	1,300	Bāsav Rājopādhyāya
2011	-	-	-	5,000	Reported as 2011 census data by Triratna Mānandhar
2013	500	250	250	1,000	Gobardhan Sharmā
2015	-	-	-	1,200	Unofficial data provided by Rās Joshi

Note:

Mānandhar’s (2007) so-called census 2011 report of Rājopādhyāya population of 5,000 does not seem possible as we all know Rājopādhyāyas are a very small population in Nepal. We will find out the true population size of Rājopādhyāyas when the current population data collection of this group will be complete in the near future.

and goat meat.⁵⁶ Most importantly, unlike other Newārs who have been abandoning their own mother tongue Nepal Bhāshā as an “erroneous” sign of modernization and assimilation with larger Nepali population, all of Rājopādhyāyas speak Nepal Bhāshā and take pride in saying it is their mother tongue.⁵⁷

Demographic Issue

Currently Rājopādhyāyas are a small population of about 1200.⁵⁸ Different individuals have estimated the

itself and/or (3) their fertility rate dropped to well below replacement (Total Fertility Rate to less than 1.8) or families became childless and at the same time mortality rate increased drastically. Postponing marriage by men and women until later ages, women entering higher education and workforce, men/women not finding eligible partners for marriage, not wanting a large family or not wanting children at all are a few of the hidden factors that may have resulted in such a rapid decrease in Rājopādhyāya population. If there are not enough sons in a community and/or no girls are found for men as their wives then it would not take very long for the whole community to disappear due to no reproduction. Note that the “*Nuga Khala*” Rājopādhyāyas of Lalitpur had already been extinct.

From socio-economic point of view, the small population of Rājopādhyāyas versus the large population of *Sesya* Newārs (in other words, the large client-priest ratio) is advantageous to Rājopādhyāyas, for those who are working as priests, because it generates good income

55 For details on *ihī*, see Allen, 1996.

56 Levy, 1990.

57 It is interesting that many Newārs have been using Nepali as their language and abandoning their mother tongue Nepal Bhāshā. The National Population and Housing Census of Nepal 2011 shows only 64% (computed from Tables 20 and 21 of 2011 census report) of Newārs speak Newār language (CBS, 2012).

58 Unofficial data from Rās Joshi through personal communication.

due to opportunities of serving many clients. However, this “large clients and small priests” situation may become problematic as the population of Rājopādhyāyas decrease further while the population of *Sesya* Newārs continue to increase. It is also worth mentioning that Shakyā (2000) found only 12% were students among the Rājopādhyāyas in the southern part of Kathmandu City, which was the lowest among all other Newār castes. This could be due to (1) a low population in the school-going age-group, or the fact that (2) most of school-going age-group are engaged in priestly duties rather than attending schools. If it is the first case, then again Rājopādhyāyas should be concerned about their probable low fertility rate and/or probable high infant and child mortality rates. Further research is warranted in this area.

From the point of view of Nepal census, this group of population is amalgamated either into the Newārs (for those who fill in the census form as Newārs) or into the “Undefined Other” group (for those who fill in the census form as “other” caste/ethnicity) because in the census of Nepal, there are only two groups of Brāhmins defined: one is the Hill Brāhmins and the other is the Terai Brāhmins (Bhatta, Jha, Maithali, and so on). Unless the Rājopādhyāyas count themselves as Newārs, they do not fit into any category according to the current census definition. Until 1981, the population censuses of Nepal were enumerated based on the language spoken rather than on ethnicity.⁵⁹ Thus there were no known identity issues for Rājopādhyāyas in those days. They were all counted as Newārs because their mother tongue has been Nepal Bhāshā. Since 1991 census enumeration has been done according to caste/ethnicity of individuals. This new methodology, perhaps, brought new issues to light among the Rājopādhyāyas who may have previously wanted to differentiate themselves from other Newārs. In one example, when Om Dharananda Rājopādhyāya stated his ethnicity as “Upādhyāya Brāhman” and his mother tongue as “Nepal Bhāshā, the 2011 census enumerator was not willing to include him in the census count.”⁶⁰

Besides the census issue, there is another socio-demographic issue faced by the Rājopādhyāyas today. Marriage within their community has become problematic lately due to the endogamous nature of marriage they prefer on the one hand and their dwindling population on

the other.⁶¹ According to my informants Rājopādhyāyas are facing challenges in finding brides and grooms despite relaxing their rule of marrying within the clan to “after five generations” from the previous rule of “after seven generations.” Men who have married other Newār girls lost their status of priesthood. Rājopādhyāya girls even pierced their noses and got married with *Parvate* Brāhmins.⁶² According to my informants, these days there are Rājopādhyāyas who feel “it is okay to marry *Parvate* Brāhman girls” while those from Bhārdwāj clan feel “it is okay to marry other Newār girls.”

The good news is that the data currently being collected on Rājopādhyāyas may shed light on the feelings of Rājopādhyāyas and with the discussion it brings, could help resolve confusion and conflict. My suggestion is that in addition to including questions such as “whether they want to be included in the Newār group or not, and if not, why,” it would be useful to also collect data on (1) the number of single men and women and their age distribution, (2) the number of children ever born to a woman, age at first birth, age at marriage, (3) how many children they want, (4) number of infants and children under-5 in the household, (5) number of infants and children under-5 who died (last year or within 5 years or 10 years), (6) women who died during reproductive stages, (7) migration pattern, and so on. Such data would be crucial to conducting quantitative study of the socio-demographic situation of Rājopādhyāya group. Furthermore, whether exogamous marriage could be an option to resolve the current lack of finding grooms and brides, and whether such marriages could be accepted in modern days without holding any stigma so that the off-springs do not have to become *Lākhe-Bājyā* and whether such off-springs could be

61 Difficulty in finding eligible marriage candidates due to changes in population structure is not a new phenomenon. One of the consequences of China’s “One-child policy” endorsed in the late 1970s intended for controlling their population explosion is that Chinese men are having difficulty in finding Chinese brides now (Xinhua, 2011). This situation has to do more with the “male child preference” than the “one child policy” in China. Needless to say, female fetuses were aborted often.

62 I was told that if girls from other castes including Rājopādhyāya girls marry Hill Brāhman (*Parvate* Brāhman), the Hill Brāhman family would not even accept water from these girls if they do not pierce their noses.

59 CBS, 1984; CBS, 1993; Kansākār, N.S. 1132.

60 Rājopādhyāya, 2012.

taught Vedic and other rites of passage rituals should also be explored. There should be some open-ended questions in the questionnaire so that the Rājopādhyāya men and women get the opportunity to speak their mind on their socio-cultural, religious, economic, traditional, and even on Newār-versus-“non-Newār” issues.

The extinction of one of the lineages “*Nuga khala*” of Lalitpur and the decline in population size is a harsh reality for the Rājopādhyāyas. Disappearance of small population groups is not new in the world and in Nepal. Newārs have lost so many castes, for example Tini, Bhambwa, and Pulupulu, among others. Some more Newār castes, very small in population, may currently be facing threats of disappearing either due to merging with other castes or due to no reproduction in families. The current problem of Rājopādhyāyas is dual in nature. Rājopādhyāya girls marrying men from other castes may result, eventually, in the decline of Rājopādhyāya population. On the other hand, not only because of the small circle of young men and women in Rājopādhyāya community but also because of modernization process and influence from popular media and foreign culture, they may seek brides and grooms from non-Rājopādhyāya groups. This may bring another obstacle: the inter-caste relationship makes them ineligible to practise their rituals as their strict rules currently stand. It also raises a question, “who is going to be the priests for *Sesya* Newārs if and when there would not be sufficient number of Rājopādhyāya priests available to serve them?”

Conclusion

Unlike so many other non-Newār groups who migrated to the Nepal Valley (today’s Kathmandu Valley) over time, assimilating and acculturating with the Newārs of the Valley and self identifying as Newārs, it is clear that the Rājopādhyāyas are somewhat divided among themselves on their identity. Given the fact that their mother tongue is *Newā Bhāy* (Nepal Bhāshā); Rājopādhyāyas have totally accepted the Newār culture; Newārs accept them as one group of their own; non-Newārs including other Brāhmins see them as Newārs; and many Rājopādhyāyas consider themselves as Newārs, there is a possibility that all of them may become Newārs one day leaving their differences in opinions aside. However considering their very small population which appears to be fast declining, Rājopādhyāyas and the other Newārs as a whole should be concerned about their future. We have already seen a number of

other small Newār groups cease to exist, perhaps due to amalgamation into various caste groups and/or due to families becoming childless. It would be unfortunate if such a situation befalls on to Rājopādhyāyas, a subgroup that have significant roles to play inside the Newār communities, their culture, language, and all-round; a subgroup that has been living with the Newārs of Nepal Valley indistinguishably since ancient time.

If the alarming trend of Rājopādhyāyas’ population decline continues, then it is time for them to think seriously about how to preserve their group numerically. The list of Hindu groups of the Newār castes would not be complete without this priestly caste of Deo-Brāhmins/ Rājopādhyāyas, thus their extinction is not something they themselves or other Newār castes would like to see. Currently, there are clearly two threats: (1) not finding eligible grooms and brides to continue their families and retain their population size, (2) the possibility of their abandoning the priest duties as modernization progresses.

The desire to stake out a separate identity on the part of some of the Rājopādhyāyas appears to be a recent phenomenon. When the scholars started to classify the Newārs into two groups, with Hindu Newār groups with Deo-Brāhman/Rājopādhyāya on top as their priests and Buddhist Newār groups with Vajrāchārya on top, there appeared to be no opposition. Rājopādhyāyas did not seem to oppose their being considered Newārs either in writing or in speech until Gérard Toffin revealed opposing views (data from 1978-1988). Although it appears appropriate to include Rājopādhyāyas as one of the Newār castes today, for all the reasons discussed earlier, additional data and research into the opinions on the topic of identity would be welcome. However, the critical issue in the current socio-demographic situation of the Rājopādhyāyas is not whether they consider themselves Newārs or not but rather on their decreasing population and probability of diminishing traditional practices. These are the two important issues on which the Rājopādhyāyas need to focus today to protect their future.

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